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The Buttonmaker's Daughter

Written by Merryn Allingham

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Merryn Allingham

The Buttonmaker's Daughter



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



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To the Lost Gardens of Heligan,
the original inspiration for this novel.

Chapter One

Sussex, England, May 1914

Her father's voice ripped the silence apart. It burst through the closed doors of the drawing room, swept its way across the hall and rattled the panelled walls of golden oak. From where she stood on the staircase, the girl could just make out his figure shadowed against the room's glass doors. A figure that was angry and pacing. Carefully, she made her way down the last remaining stairs, then tiptoed to a side entrance. The air was fresh on her skin, cool and tangy, the air of a glorious May evening. A sun that had shone for hours still lingered in the sky and a few birds, unsure of when this long day would end, continued their song.

She walked purposefully across the flagged terrace and down the semicircular steps to an expanse of newly mown grass. Its scent was enticing and she had to stop herself from picking up her skirt and dancing across the vast lawn. It was relief that made her feel that way, relief that she'd escaped the house and its hostility. From a young age, she'd been encircled. Family discord had been a constant. Her parents' union was what was once known as a marriage of convenience, but whose convenience Elizabeth had never been sure. Their ill-assorted pairing had been a blight, an

immovable cloud which hung over everything within the home.

Uncle Henry had done something bad, it seemed. Something to do with the stream that couched the perimeter of both their estates. An act of calculated spite, her father had roared. Whatever it was, she wanted no part of it. She shook her mind free and strode across the grass as swiftly as her narrow skirt allowed, her speedy passage disturbing one of Joshua's prize peacocks. The bird squawked at her in annoyance and flew up onto the ridge of the stone basin that sat in the centre of the lawn, fanning his feathers irritatedly. He was lucky the gardeners had yet to prime the fountain, or he might have ended more ruffled still. The warm weather had arrived without notice and caught the staff racing to catch up. The roses crowding the pergola that linked lawn and kitchen garden were already unfurling, their scent strong.

She passed beneath the grand arch leading to the huge swathe of land that grew fruit and vegetables to feed the whole of Summerhayes, and felt its red brick humming with the heat of the day's sun. The tension she'd been carrying began to slip away and her limbs relax into the reflected warmth. Today had been difficult. Her father's temper, always erratic, had exploded into such fury that the very walls of the house had trembled. At such moments, she was used to finding solace in her studio, paint and canvas transporting her to a world far removed from the sharp edges of life at Summerhayes. But today, painting had failed her. And miserably.

She stopped to listen, the sound of young voices floating towards her across the still air. From behind hoops of sweet peas planted amid the potatoes and cabbages and onions,

she could just make out the figures of William and his companion. They were making their way along the gravel path that lay at right angles to where she stood. It was late, too late for them to be out. They were defying the curfew imposed when Oliver had first arrived to spend the long school holiday with her brother.

'You'd better get yourselves indoors,' she called out to them, as the boys made their way along the cruciform of gravel that bisected the kitchen garden. 'Papa is in a towering temper and you'll be for it if he sees you're still out.'

'We've been down to the lake,' Oliver said. 'We wanted to check on progress, but not much has happened. In fact, just the opposite, the site looks a mudbath.'

'The stream has stopped flowing,' her brother put in. 'At least, I think that's the problem. The lake isn't a lake any more. It's a mess.'

They were near enough now for her to see their grubby trousers and flapping shirts, no doubt a result of the check on progress. 'You look hideous. If Papa sees you, you're bound to be punished. Make sure you creep in quietly.'

'Why, is he in a temper?'

Often there seemed no rhyme or reason to her father's outbursts and, when she didn't answer, William said, 'Is it Uncle Henry?'

She nodded.

'He must have done something to the stream,' he continued. 'He did warn that he would if the gardeners kept taking water.' In the muted light of evening, her brother looked older than his fourteen years.

'I can't see why he should,' Oliver said spikily. 'There's a stream three feet deep flowing along the edge of both estates – plenty of water for everyone.'

'You don't know Uncle Henry,' William said.

But if you did, she thought, you would understand his actions as perfectly consistent. Whatever Henry Fitzroy could do to hinder or destroy his brother-in-law's plans, he would.

'Go on, both of you. Make haste and use the side door. With luck you won't be seen.'

'Likely the old man will still be shouting and won't even notice we've even been out.'

William was becoming cheeky. That was the influence of his more forthright friend and her father wouldn't take kindly to it. Or to any show of rebellion. Joshua ruled him with a rod of iron and so far her gentle brother had bent himself to his parent's will, retreating to his mother for comfort. But now Alice appeared to have a rival for his affections. Oliver had become William's closest confidant. Her brother had been wretched at school, a school their father insisted he attend – until Oliver had appeared at the beginning of the winter term. But Olly, as William called him, had proved a saviour and the change in her brother was astonishing. She could see why they liked each other, why they had come to depend on one another. At school, they were both outsiders, despised by their fellows and teachers alike: William the son of a button manufacturer and Oliver, the son of a Jewish lawyer.

'Are you coming back with us?' The light was fading fast and William had begun to look anxious.

'In a short while. I'd like to take a look at the lake for myself.'

'You'll need boots,' her brother warned.

'And a dress that's a few yards shorter,' Olly quipped.

'Don't worry. I'll not be long.'

She shooed them away with a wave of her hand and carried on along the narrow gravel path that skirted the various outbuildings: past the boiler house, the bothy, the dark house that forced Summerhayes' rhubarb and chicory and sea kale, and, finally, the head gardener's office. She glanced across at the huddle of buildings. Nestled together, they made a charming picture but afforded little comfort. The one time she'd visited – for some reason, she had found herself in the tool shed – she'd seen immediately that light was not to be on the workers. The interior had been gloomy, with small windows and little daylight. It was damp and cold, too, since only Mr Harris enjoyed a fireplace, his one luxury in a room of bare boards and battered furniture.

Through another grand brick arch and into the Wilderness. That was the name she and William had given it. Her father insisted it should be called the Exotic Garden but from the start it had been the Wilderness to them, a place where they spent as many hours as possible, hiding from their nursemaid or later their tutor and governess, and hiding from each other.

She came to an abrupt halt. Something was wrong. She stood for a moment and then realised what was missing: she should be hearing the splash of water against stones. A stream flowing to her left, flowing down from the encircling bank and into the lake. But there was no sound of water, no sound at all. The garden seemed to have come to a standstill and an uncomfortable quiet reigned. She took a long breath, then walked through the laurel hedge, the living arch that marked the entrance to her father's most cherished project, and saw immediately what William had meant.

A little of Joshua Summer's plan had already been realised. A flagged path had been laid to provide a gentle

promenade in a space that was made for the sun, and aromatic herbs planted in the cracks between the paving stones. Beyond and behind the path, bed after bed of Mediterranean plants would find their home and eventually flourish in profusion. On one of the long sides of the lake, a small summerhouse made of Sussex flint and stone had been built, its wooden seats looking out across the water to the terrace and the pillars of what would one day be a classical temple. She could see its foundations from where she stood. They were complete and several of the pillars had already been fashioned and were lying to one side, like giant marble limbs that had somehow become detached from their body. But the magnificent lake, designed to reflect the temple's elegance, was now little more than a muddy pond, and the statue her father had commissioned – a dolphin whose mouth spouted a constant stream of water – rose, strange and solitary, from out of the ruin.

Somewhere a dog howled. It was an unworldly sound funnelling its way to her through the thick evening air. The hairs at the nape of her neck stood to attention, but almost immediately she realised the noise had come from Amberley, from one of her uncle's hounds, and gave it no more thought. Picking her way along the flagstones, she had to lift her skirts clear of the sludge before gingerly circling the large oval of dirty water. She had reached the west corner of the temple when a noise much closer to hand startled her. Wildlife in the garden was prolific and for a moment she thought it must be a fox moving stealthily through the tall trees that grew behind the temple, making his way perhaps to the Wilderness to find his tea. But then she heard a cough. A man. And footsteps, soft but unmistakable. The lateness of the hour was suddenly

important. She shouldn't be here. Her mother had warned her often enough that the estate was not secure, that there was nothing to stop a curious passer-by from scaling the six foot wall and enjoying Summerhayes for himself. She took a step back, poised to flee. The gloom of dusk had settled on the garden and the overhanging trees behind the temple workings cast an even deeper shadow across her path. There was a crackle of twigs, a swish of undergrowth.

She turned abruptly.

Chapter Two

'Forgive me, I've startled you.'

A young man's slim form appeared from behind one of the prostrate columns. At the sound of his voice, she half turned back. He was hardly the threatening figure her mother had warned of. She fixed her eyes on his face, looking at him as closely as she dared, and was sure she had seen him before. She *had* seen him before, if only from a distance.

'Are you the architect?' she said uncertainly.

'Not quite.' He gave a slightly crooked smile. 'I'm the architect's assistant, at least until the end of this summer.'

She found herself smiling back. 'And what happens at the end of the summer?'

'My apprenticeship will be over. I'll be the architect you took me for.' He strode towards her, holding out his hand. 'I should introduce myself. My name is Aiden Kellaway.'

'Elizabeth Summer,' she said, trying not to think what Alice would say to this unconventional meeting. Aiden Kellaway's grasp was firm and warm.

'I know who you are. I've seen you on the terrace when you take a stroll with your mother.' He had an attractive face, she couldn't help noticing. He was clean shaven but

his light brown hair was luxuriant, falling in an unruly wave above soft green eyes.

Those eyes were resting on her and she said hastily, 'You seem to have met a problem here.' She waved a cuff of shadow lace towards the quagmire.

'The gardeners have certainly. Mr Simmonds and I will keep supervising the building work, but a temple without its lake is a sad sight. Do you know why this has happened?'

'Why there's no water?'

'I know why there's no water – I walked upstream for half a mile and saw the dam that's been built.'

The Amberley estate lay above Summerhayes and Henry Fitzroy had evidently used this advantage to divert the river and render Joshua's beloved garden a sad joke. Elizabeth felt intensely sorry for her father. He was a rough man. A life devoted to making buttons had not conferred the polish needed to succeed in the highest circles, but for all that her father possessed a deep and instinctive love of beauty.

Aiden Kellaway was looking at her enquiringly. 'I meant why your uncle – I'm presuming it is your uncle who ordered the diversion – why he should wish to ruin the most beautiful part of a very beautiful garden.'

She wasn't sure how to answer. She knew the reason only too well but Mr Kellaway was a stranger and she had no wish to confess the family feud. Something in his face, though, invited her to be honest. 'There is enmity between Amberley and Summerhayes. There has been for years and most local people know of it. Anything Uncle Henry can do to upset my father, he will.'

Aiden shook his head. 'That's sad. And to hurt his own sister, too.'

'I doubt he cares much about my mother. He's not that

kind of man.' She stopped abruptly. Honesty was one thing, gossiping in this unguarded fashion quite another. 'In any case,' she hurried on, 'the Italian Garden is my father's idea. Mama never ventures further than the lawn.'

'Why Italian? Does your father have connections there?'

'None that I know of, but when he was very young, he travelled to Italy and spent several months journeying northwards from Rome. He still talks of it. He told me one day that it was a revelation to him, how people all those years ago had created a beauty that endured for centuries. I think it made him want to create something himself – something that would delight people for generations.'

Her father's one Italian excursion, it seemed, had crystallised a yearning that until then had lived only in his heart.

'Your father is a visionary man. Summerhayes is a wonderful project,' Aiden said warmly. 'He can be rightfully proud of creating a glorious site out of what was once barren pasture. Or so I understand.'

'The gardens *are* my father's pride and joy. But the barren pasture, as you call it, once belonged to Amberley.' She would not spell out her uncle's jealousy, she had said too much already, but she saw from the young man's expression that he understood.

He simply nodded and looked out across the swathe of mud to the laurel arch, now faded to shades of grey in the disappearing light. 'I wonder, though, why your uncle is so opposed. Having such a magnificent garden as a neighbour must add distinction to his own property.'

'I doubt he'd agree. Amberley is an old estate and Uncle Henry clings to its past glory. My father has the money to indulge himself with projects such as this.'

'And your uncle does not?'

She would say no more. The subject was too intimate and too painful. Any more and she might reveal the whole sorry business, the transaction between Amberley Hall and her father. A transaction of which for years she'd been only dimly aware.

'I see,' was all he said. But she knew that he was thinking through the answer to a question he couldn't ask: why her mother, a Fitzroy of Amberley, with a family history stretching back to the Conqueror, had married a man like Joshua Summer.

The dusk was closing in and the crêpe de chine dress she had donned for dinner was proving uncomfortably thin. She shivered slightly and he noticed. 'It's getting chilly. May I escort you back to the house?'

'I won't trouble you, Mr Kellaway. You will wish to be getting home and I can find my own way back, even in the gloom. I know the gardens too well to get lost.'

'I'm sure.' He smiled the slightly crooked smile again. 'But I'm walking your way. My bicycle is waiting for me outside the bothy, though I must be quiet collecting it. The boy on duty has to be up and dressed before five.'

She hadn't noticed the bicycle when she'd passed by, but that wasn't surprising. How her father's men came and went barely impinged on her. Why would it? She lived in a bubble, an affluent bubble, but real life went on elsewhere. Or so it had always seemed.

'Do you live far from Summerhayes?'

The bicycle had prompted the question but she was genuinely interested. Then she worried that she had been too personal. The rigours of a London Season had not cured her of the candour her mother deplored. Alice's strictures rang loudly in her ears. They had been repeated often

enough for her to know them by heart: *A girl should keep her distance from anyone who is not family or a family friend.*

Aiden seemed to find nothing amiss with her question and answered readily enough: 'I have lodgings in the village. A room with board in one of the cottages by the church.'

'And is it comfortable?'

'Comfortable enough. Though the cooking could be better.'

'It's late. You will have missed your evening meal.'

'I will. But I'll get cold meat and pickles instead – my favourite supper.'

She wondered for a moment how cold meat and pickles tasted, and how wonderful it must be to sit at a kitchen table, still in your work clothes, and just eat. No dressing for dinner, no servant hovering, listening to a stilted conversation, and no trudging through course after unnecessary course before escape beckoned.

'Allow me,' and before she could protest, he'd tucked her hand in his arm and was steering her along the flagged pathway and out beneath the laurel arch into the Wilderness.

'This is an amazing place,' he said, as they followed the winding path towards the walled garden. 'So many rare and beautiful plants.'

'My father chose every tree and shrub. They come from all over the world, I believe. He told me that it was plant hunters in the last century who brought them back to this country, and made a fortune doing so.'

'And each with an adventure attached to it, I'd swear, and a story to tell.'

She wondered what Aiden Kellaway's story might be. In the cool of late evening, the warmth of his body as they

walked side by side was unnerving her, and she tried hard not to think of it.

'Do you often walk in the gardens?'

She grabbed at the mundane question. 'I take a turn on the terrace – where you saw me with my mother. Sometimes I venture a little further.' When I can, she thought. When I can be free of parents, free of servants.

'Like tonight. What tempted you to wander so far?'

'I suppose because it was such a wonderful evening.'

They had reached the kitchen garden and in the silvery spread of a just risen moon the most humble of vegetables had taken on a majestic air.

'I thought it wonderful, too. There was no need for me to stay behind. I could have finished the few tasks I had in the morning, and Mr Simmonds urged me to leave with him. But this evening was too good to waste behind the door of a poky cottage.'

'Do you enjoy working with Mr Simmonds?' It was something else she genuinely wanted to know. Questions seemed to be tripping off her tongue tonight, far more than she'd ever needed to ask.

'He's a brilliant architect and an excellent mentor. I've worked with him for five years and learnt a great deal. I'm lucky he's one of the old school. He likes to work on site from his own drawings, rather than sit in an office and direct others. And that suits me very well. Since my uncle organised the apprenticeship, I've never looked back.'

He stopped walking for a moment and looked down at her. It was as though he needed to dwell on his own words. 'You know it was a huge piece of good fortune for me that he met Jonathan – at a race meeting, would you believe?'

'Racing?'

'Jonathan Simmonds is a bit of a gambler,' Aiden admitted, walking on once more, 'but don't tell your father. He might not like to think his architect has such a weakness.'

'And you? Are you a gambler?'

'No, indeed. What would I gamble with? Mind you, my uncle has hardly a penny to his name. But then the Irish can never resist a flutter.'

'He's Irish?' She was learning something new every minute. Right now, though, the Irish were not the most popular of nations. Only yesterday, she'd heard her father fume against the 'Irish trouble' and predict that a civil war there was all but inevitable.

'It's not just my uncle that's Irish. I am too.'

'You don't sound it.' He didn't, though now she was aware, she thought she could detect the slightest of lilts to his voice.

'That's because I've been in England too long. And my aunt and uncle even longer.'

'How long? Why did they come to England? Where do they live?'

The bicycle was propped against the bothy wall, as he'd said. He took hold of the handlebars and wheeled it onto the path that led to a side gate and out onto the village road. She stayed where she was and he turned back to her.

'So many questions, Miss Summer.' She blushed hotly. He was right. She'd been intrusive to the point of rudeness. 'But am I allowed one?'

'Yes, of course,' she said hastily. 'I'm sorry.'

'Then, what are you doing deep in the Sussex countryside? Shouldn't you be in London, having a fine time?'

'I've had a fine time,' she she was quick to counter.

'Still… you might enjoy a very different kind of company,

away from Summerhayes.' He pointed to her hands where the faintest traces of paint were still visible. He was far too acute.

'I daub, that's all. And I'm happy enough here.'

'Are you?'

His face glimmered beneath the arc of moonlight and she could just make out his expression. He was considering her intently, as though wanting to drill down into her deepest thoughts, and she found it discomfiting. It was time for her to leave.